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ABSTRACT

Students in a study skills class at City University of New York keep a journal as a regular record of the process of their learning to be college students: studying, attending classes and lectures, taking notes, navigating textbooks, and preparing for tests. They make four entries per week, one for each class, each focusing on detailed, concrete observations about their behaviors and that of other students in the classroom. Gradually, they learn to use the journals to address specific problems that they have, such as paying attention in class, and begin to develop insight into the causes of their difficulties. Every four or five weeks, they are given an additional essay assignment, a journal summary, to help them get a perspective on their habits and patterns of behavior as students. These assignments bring together two traditional polarities of a study skills course: a concern with clarifying and improving students' attitudes toward their work and a desire to teach practical skills such as note-taking, using a text, or preparing for and taking tests. Journal writing gives students an opportunity for self-study, reflection, and class discussion that can develop a self-awareness about the learning process. (HTH)

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Learning Behavior in Focus:
Student Journals in the Study Skills Classroom

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In my study skills classes, I ask students to keep a journal as a regular record of the process of their learning to be a college student: studying, attending classes and lectures, taking notes, navigating textbooks and preparing for tests. This study skills journal is a way for students to record their struggle with school. Every four or five weeks, I also give students an additional assignment, a journal summary, to help them get a perspective on their habits and patterns of behavior as students. The journal and the summary are both focused on the students' schoolwork, but they also include thoughts about the people with whom the students work and students' feelings about studying and about school. These assignments bring together the two traditional polarities of a study skills course: a concern with clarifying and improving students' attitudes toward their work and a desire to teach

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practical skills such as note-taking, using a text, or preparing for and and taking tests (Schmelzer and Brozo, 1982).

I use the journal and the journal summary in order to give the students "opportunities to discover how to learn," as Hayes and Diehl urge in a recent critique of study skills programs (1982), and because these assignments put the emphasis of the class "on the student's assuming responsibility for developing personalized learning strategies."

Studying is a complex process in which the student is the central actor and the motivating force. To become competent at studying, the student must develop personal qualities in addition to learning specific skills. (For a review of current research in study skills, see Armbruster and Anderson, 1981 and Hounsell, 1979.) Hounsell suggests that it is essential to raise "students' consciousness of themselves as learners and to develop an aware, reflective approach to learning" (1979) in order to make students successful. This awareness can aid students in developing a sense of responsibility for their own learning and a sense of how their own motivations and behaviors affect the act of studying.

Writing the journals and journal summaries gives students an opportunity for self-study, reflection and class discussion that can develop this self-awareness about the learning process. In addition, students get much-needed practice in writing in a format that comes naturally and easily to them.

(Fulwiler [1980] and Moffett [1981] discuss the use of journals in "writing across the curriculum" programs.)

The Study Skills Journal

The first writing assignment in the study skills class is for each student to keep an on-going study skills journal. Students are asked to make four entries each week in the journal, one entry for each of their classes, including my own. I explain to students that they can write about anything that happens in the class period that they choose. They can write about their participation, or lack of participation, their difficlutly in paying attention, or in understanding the teacher, about what they learn, how the class relates to other classes, or about what other students do in the class. However, I insist that the journal entries focus on the classroom experience. I want students to write about problems or experiences that they have in a class or in studying, but I want them to avoid writing down their never-ending worries and obsessions about school or about events outside the classroom and school situation.

I ask students to focus their journal writing so they will make detailed, concrete observations about their behaviors and the behaviors of other students in the classroom situation:

> I went to my seat by the window. I notice every time that I go into a class I always sit by the window. I don't know why I sit by the window, but I do. I sat there listening to the teacher and my classmates exchanging words. The teacher was talking about the meaning of argument. After a while, I noticed the teacher was repeating the same thing over and over. I remembered one of my teachers told me, 'If a teacher repeats themselves over again and again, they want you to write it down.' So, I did write it down . . . .
>
> Then, the teacher finally dismissed us. I went to the bookstore and got all my supplies for my English class. I went to the lunchroom and sat down. I opened my pad and started thinking about what I did in my class. And that's how I got to write all this.

The student moves easily from the window, to listening to the teacher and fellow students, to the teacher's repetition, to taking notes, to the bookstore and finally to the lunchroom and writing this journal entry. There is a wealth of concrete detail, a wealth of noticing.

Students keep the study skills journals for four weeks before we make direct use of them in class. I do not want students to be self-conscious when they write. Similarly, I feel that students write better at this early stage if they are unconcerned with writing "correctly." However, I do read the journals each week to be sure that students are doing the work and that their writing is focused on classroom behaviors as I have indicated in the assignment.

As students write under my tutelage and under the pressure of frequent classroom discussions of what should be in the journals, they learn to use the journals to address specific problems that they have, such as listening and paying attention in class:

> Today in class I learned something. It wasn't much, but I can say that I've accomplished something. I began to fall asleep, but as Professor Hoffman began talking and said if you don't listen and try to understand what is going on in the class, you're wasting your time here. I said to myself, "Why am I here if I don't listen?" Then, I began to listen, to try to make sense out of today's work.

Students also begin to develop insight into the causes of difficulty in study and learning. Since most students are familiar with personal journals or diaries as a means of recording their feelings and experience, the journal format also gives students the opportunity to write about critical issues in their lives that might be difficult to discuss in class. The journals help students make connections between their private life and their life at school:

> Today as I sit here in English, I find myself very nervous, because the teacher is collecting the work she assigned. I would of had the work, but I got the date on which it was due wrong. I thought she was going to collect it on Thursday, but she collected it on Wednesday. I find it so hard being a student now with everything going on in my house . . . .

Writing about a Test

A variation of the journal assignment is a series of entries written before and after a test in another course. The first journal entry is written just before the class takes a test in another class. In my class an hour before the test students are asked to write about how they have studied and

prepared for the test. Here is how one student, Tony, described studying for the test:

> Yesterday Sabrena, Dorothy, Juan, Debbie and myself stayed in after Elaine's class. We stayed in that classroom because it had a blackboard. We went over some examples that Richie gave us in class. We helped each other in figuring out the best way to remember which statement was valid. . . . But before we knew it, an hour and a half had passed by, so we decided to meet in the library in the morning. At home I went over all my notes from day one. I kept spelling Modus Ponens, Modus Tollens, over and over. I didn't try to over-study because Richie said it would be better to come in with a clear head.

After the test, the same students write down their reactions to the test -- what they could have done to study better and how things might have been different for them. Here is Tony's reaction:

> I know I studied good and got a lot of rest, but I didn't feel right. I felt that I left something out, but I looked over and over my exam paper and I didn't leave anything out. I finished the exam in less than half an hour. That's what really scared me -- or is it that I really know the work well. I feel a little scared.

As a final step, we write again when the professor returns the graded examinations. Now students were asked to assess what they could have done to prepare for the examination better. The following is Tony's third reaction:

> I think I studied good for Richard's test, but I should have gone over the exam more carefully. I felt I did put in enough time studying. One thing I learned by going over my exam is that I have to read the directions more carefully. I know that if I know the work I shouldn't go in the exam with a big head, like a Mister Know-it-all.

Keeping he journal helped students put the testing experience in perspective. When Tony had the insight that his attitude, his "big head," was affecting his grade, he was then able to change. The improvement came about when Tony identified destructive behaviors ("I have to read the directions more carefully") and changed them.

The Journal Summaries

With the exception of my cursory check of the journals every week, the notebooks remain a private, personal record for a month or five weeks. Once the journal writing habit is established, I ask students to read through their journals to find patterns of behavior -- both good and bad -- that stand out. To give a focus to the discussion and the journal reading, I ask each student to write an essay that summarizes the journals -- a reflective essay about what they notice about themselves as students. This assignment gives students a method for getting perspective on themselves as the central actors in the process of learning and studying, helping them take responsibility for their own behavior and attitudes in doing college work:

> My attitude toward college was it was going to be hard, but I could handle it. I was wrong. I wasn't able to handle anything.

> My first month of school was impossible. I couldn't sit down and take time with any of my assignments. I was fighting with myself and trying to accept becoming a student.
>
> Taking care of a family and going to school was hard for me. I managed in my own way, but it was still hard. I would take more time on my assignments and would spend long hours at home studying. I would ask for help and would try to deal with my situation.
>
> I had to get used to the idea of preparing my assignments, studying long hours, and, and dealing with things at home. I couldn't believe the amount of homework they were giving. I just couldn't do it, but it had to be done. As time went on, it was difficult, but I put up the fight.

Writing the journal summaries is a study project in itself. As an exercise, it provides the groups and the class as a whole with an opportunity to practice and to discuss the process -- central to both studying and writing -- of selecting and organizing material according to a personal schema. Moffett describes the journal summary as a "natural lesson in composing" which "compels the student to determine what is salient, select accodingly, and organize around some notion of continuity and unity " (1981). Reading a textbook, studying class notes or preparing for an examination requires the same organizing around a principle of unity and continuity and the same process of selecting according to "what is salient."

The small groups that are set up for writing the journal summaries are intended to give students support both in writing and in thinking about themselves. In the groups students feel less alone with their problems and students usually learn from

seeing themselves in the mirror of their peers' mistakes and successes.

There are three journal summaries assigned during the semester, one at the fifth week, one at the tenth and one at the end of the semester. Students meet in small groups to write each summary. Keeping the study skills journal continues for the whole semester.

The value of the journal and the journal summary is that they put the emphasis on the student's responsibility in the learning process. These assignments give students a way to think about what it means to be a student -- what skills are needed and what attitudes are needed. The journals and summaries give the students a means to develop the insight they need to become better students.

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